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L.A. BANDS: ROCKING OR REELING?

BY RICHARD CROMELIN

A year ago, Pasadena's Van Halen was just a promising band on the L.A. scene. Its most stellar dates were in Glendora, Redondo Beach and Van Nuys. Since then, the quartet has sold more than a million copies of its debut album, headlined the 10,000-seat Long Beach Arena and opened for the Rolling Stones at the New Orleans Superdome.

Devo was another contender, working the local club circuit after relocating from Ohio. It finally paid off with a Warner Bros. album that registered strongly in the charts. Devo also won a role in Neil Young's upcoming film and a TV spot on "Saturday Night Live."

Further encouragement to local bands came with the signings of the Dickies, the Pop and the Heaters. Now the Knack looks like the next L.A. band to go big time. The explosion of local talent in 1978 marked a flourishing of native bands unmatched since the go-go days of the mid-'60s.

At the start of '79, however, the mood of the participants is one of guarded optimism at best. Many see the Whisky's recent de-emphasis of local bands as a major blow and feel that the record companies' attitude has worsened.

Perhaps the most pessimistic observer is Slash magazine pundit Claude Bessy, who just returned from two months in England: "There are quite a few talented bands here who are in the wrong country, or in the wrong part of the country.

"In London, it's totally accepted. The new music is definitely the new music, nothing less. It has respect and it can live. It's not constantly on the verge of extinction.

"Here, there's no hangout, no scene. Places close, places open—it's an insecure feeling. The Masque is about the only hope we've got. If the Masque doesn't do it, I suggest everybody move out of Los Angeles."

The Masque, the Hollywood punk mecca that was closed last year for safety code violations, is struggling to its feet again. According to owner Brendan Mullen, renovation will begin soon and the club should be open for business by the end of March.

Other venues have filled the gap on a hit-and-miss basis. The Troubadour books new wave, among other things, as does Club 88 in West L .A. and the Rock Corporation in the Valley. Madame Wong's in Chinatown has become a promising site for the tamer new wave entries, though its recent switch to an over-21 policy chokes off a significant portion of the audience. Gazzarri's on the Sunset Strip will soon begin showcasing unsigned, original groups.

PHOTO BY GEORGE ROSE

Above, Devo enjoys upward mobility after moving from Ohio to L.A. and building a following in local clubs.

PHOTO BY LARRY ARMSTRONG

Left, Van Halen's David Roth moved from Pasadena rock scene to a million-selling LP and worldwide tour in 1978.

The Whisky, the major platform for local bands last year, has become an eclectic venue, presenting everything from disco groups to theatrical revues. Its emphasis is on record company acts, and the club has been reviled for abandoning local groups.

"The people complaining," says the Whisky's David Forest, "are the little bitty two-month-old garage bands. They draw nothing and they're unprofessional, and we can't depend on their people to be sane.

"When I took over in the middle of July the place was a madhouse. And labels and managers and agents saw what we were having, and they wouldn't book their major acts here.

"Local bands don't draw real well. We need 200 people a night to make it worthwhile to be open. I am going to loosen up a little in the middle of the week, but it has to be a professional act. I'm all for the local bands, and we're going to use them, maybe to open. But it's a question of draw."

Under the circumstances, few bands can make a living with their music in Los Angeles. Some have tested new waters by sinking their resources into self-financed tours. The Screamers and X have hit the East Coast, and bands like the Alleycats regularly play the more fertile San Francisco circuit.

"We came close to breaking even on our trip," says Philip Miller, the Screamers' manager. "But the long-run gains are introducing ourselves to the nation and making many valuable contacts. I'd recommend it to any band.

"What's needed here is a strong promoter to open it up to the masses of kids that are the potential audience. I see a lot of these kids coming and enjoying it, but people have to hear it and figure out what it is or they'll never be curious about it."

But there is evidence that the audience is expanding, if somewhat haltingly. "Last summer our audience was basically the hard-core, punk-rock audience," says Randy Stodola of the Alleycats. "But now it's spreading out to other people."

The Masque's Mullen echoes the sentiment: "The audience is more generalized and it's not confined to one stereotype. It's much more diverse in age group and musical interest, and even the hard-core followers of the original scene aren't as closed-minded as they might have been a year ago."

Another product of a year's worth of performing experience is a marked musical improvement. "There's a more healthy approach to the idea of musicianship," says Mullen. "Bands are more professional in attitude and more polished instrumentally. On that level they're a lot better off."

The groups most often mentioned are L.A.'s major new wave bands are the Screamers, X and the Alleycats, with the Plugz, the Flyboys, the Go-Gos, Fear and the Controllers moving up on the inside. Bates Motel, the Zippers, Gary Valentine & the Know and 20/20 (see page 58) head the less experimental field, and the traditional forces (heavy metal-cum-progressive) include Smile, Bluebeard, Bad Axe, Eulogy, Pegasus, Quiet Riot, Yankee Rose and Geisha.

The Whisky's David Forest comments on the last batch: "Those acts draw the more conventional kids from conventional homes. They have jobs, therefore they have money, they have cars, they can buy tickets. That's the kind of music that gets airplay and sells out the Forum."

The same attitude prevails at record companies, who are looking for more Van Halens rather than another Devo. The indictments of the major labels are profuse and impassioned. Says Slash's Bessy: "As far as I'm concerned, they've proven that the last thing they care about is music or the young people. Those companies wouldn't be scared of fascism or mass murder as long as they could market it and sell it. The only thing that scares them is lack of money."

Please Turn to Page 61

POPPOURRI

58 20/20'S VISION
BY KRISTINE McKENNA
Local boys mine the mother lode of '60s pop.

62 POPLINE

63 FACES
BY DENNIS HUNT
Stephen Stills returns to his old stamping ground—the Sunset Strip.

64 LEONARD FEATHER
Blues singer Esther Phillips penetrates Poland.

65 RADIO
BY JAMES BROWN
Drama, comedy, adventure and mystery return to the airwaves.

66 POP EVENTS

68 TODAY'S RADIO LOG

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